The word and its technological instances

"Ceci tuera cela"
– Frollo in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Hugo, 1831)

With these three words, Victor Hugo characterizes both accurately and desperately what has been the re-
curring fear (or hope) every time some 'new' technology is introduced to the world. In the case of Frollo, the
Archdeacon in Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris, it is the fear that the book will kill the cathedral, that print will
destroy the image. However it sounds as if the only way to apply this sentence to an age that is governed
by electronic media is by reversing it, namely that the image is killing print. Replacing ceci with "l'ordinateur"
and cela with "le livre imprimé" suffices to ignite discussions on books versus e-books, printed matter ver-
sus computer screens, and so on. The general idea that underpins many of these conversations – at least
the ones I found myself entangled in so far – is in one way or another that the advent of electronics has
sealed the fate of print, leaving us with only two options: to mourn or to celebrate. But diametrically oppos-
ing the one to the other does not offer viable terms to reflect upon technological shifts, such as those within
the field of writing and reading.

Electronic media, with the computer as its crown jewel, meant just another – nevertheless huge – step in
the continuous process of further 'technologizing' the word ever since man invented writing. It is a process
of constant modification, transformation and complementation rather than elimination, preservation or de-
valuation. The fact that writing in itself is a technological invention and thus artificial (by contrast with natu-
ral, oral speech) is important to realize. Although this sounds as a condemnation, it is quite the contrary.
Like other artificial creations and probably more than any other, writing is utterly invaluable and essential
for a fuller realization of human potential (Ong, [1982] 2002, p11). As literate cultures have managed to fully
interiorize this technology, it heightened human consciousness in a way no other invention ever did. It has
unlocked possibilities that are impossible to conceive of in a strictly oral culture. But it remains a technology,
regardless its level of human interiorization.

The act of locking words in a visual field, which is ultimately what writing is, fundamentally changes and
defines human perception, thought processes and social structures. It is the moment where verbal expres-
sion shifts from the evanescent world of sound to the quasi-permanent object-world of space. The media
developed to effectuate this shift inevitably take part in an operation of constant moulding and reconfiguring
not only the practices of writing and reading but also the whole cultural landscape they are embedded in.
I want to turn my graduation project into a quest to raise awareness around the impact of the far-reaching
technologization of the word on culture and attempt to highlight the artificial nature of many of the everyday
tools we use to read and write.

Relation to previous practice

I will describe two of the projects I have done last year to illustrate what my interests are and how I work.
They should provide a wider context for understanding where this proposal comes from and why it is valu-
able for me to delve deeper in this field of research.

The Listener

The Listener (in collaboration with Laurier Rochon) is an inter-
active installation that consists of two main parts. Firstly, it is
an online multi-person chatbox that people can join by surfing
to a certain web address. The chat is mediated by a computer
script that alters the original messages by adding, deleting or
replacing words. It operates in such a way that every partici-
pant sees his/her own unchanged messages, while the recipi-
ents are presented with a transformed variation. Secondly, a

large pen plotter instantly prints out a complete transcript of the conversation, showing both the original and altered version of the messages. This way, the workings of the computer script are exposed – which is not the case in the interface of the chatbox itself – and a physical log of the conversation is made. The installation was presented at an internet cafe where people were invited to join the chatbox and could see their conversations being plotted at the same time.

As soon as someone sends a message to the chatbox, a filtering process takes place that scans the message for certain (predefined) words or pieces of text, such as 'hello' or 'how are you'. If there is a match, a script replaces these sections with an (also predefined) alternative text before actually posting the message to the chatbox. A logfile of the conversation, which is kept on a webserver. In order to print it out on the plotter, another script checks the logfile every second and looks if there were any changes made since the last check. If so, the script will use the information that is embedded in the logfile to first print the original message in black and afterwards the 'corrections' made by the script in red, if there were any.

As a text is read, a certain meaning is derived from it. The installation tries to address this creation of meaning in an online context. It is an attempt to show the subtle inner workings of computer programs when mediating the information we consume online. The use of the plotter is meant to amplify this: as a counterweight to the sneakiness of the computer program, it tries to raise the awareness about this issue by literally putting it permanently on paper in a very loud and ostentatious way.

Indian Camp by Ernest Hemingway

Indian Camp by Ernest Hemingway is an installation composed of four inkjet printers that perform the eponymous short story, each representing either one individual character or the narrator. The story is about a trip to a so-called „Indian Camp" by a medical doctor, his son, and his uncle, in order to help an indigenous woman to give birth to her child. During the process - a Caesarian incision has to be made to save the mother and her child - the husband commits suicide. An important aspect is that apart from the narrator's voice, the whole story consists of dialogue between the father, uncle and son.

The installation uses the fictional time of the story as a timeline for the actual – 'real-time' – print performance. Dialogues and narrator breaks are thus printed out as if they would be performed by actors in a theatre play or movie, synchronized with each other and containing the time gaps of the original narrative. One complete print-out of the story is a five hour sequence of intense, concentrated printing sessions interspersed with long pauses. Nothing was added to or left out of the original text. As they are being printed, the sheets – usually not containing more than one sentence or a few words – fall on the floor, so people can pick them up to read and recompose the part of the story that has already been 'told'.

I wrote a script that constantly checks the current time and matches it with a logfile that contains the information about which part of the story has to be sent to which printer on what time. Whenever there is a match between the real, current time and a time-stamp in the logfile, the script instantly sends the according piece of text to the according printer. The assignment of – real – time to the text was done through my own interpretation of how the - fictional - time evolved in the story. The physical installation was set up in such a way that the three printers representing the characters in the story were facing each other, the one representing the narrator stood a little apart. The computer that was running the script and controlling the printers was not visible.

The thematic project of the trimester dealt with re-enactments. The footage that was shown as research material consisted mostly of documentation about re-enactments of big historical events which were mostly driven by a desire to understand or experience the event again. With the installation I explored the possibilities of re-enacting a piece of fictional, printed prose by means of printed performance instead.

Motivation, trajectory and practical starting points

Motivation

Apart from these projects, there is another source of inspiration that brought me to the subject-matter of this proposal. Last year I attended a symposium in The Hague called 'The Unbound Book'. The website announced the event as 'a conference that invites its speakers and audience to take part in defining the transformative landscape of reading, publishing and learning' (The Unbound Book, n.d., [online]). A topic that not only aligns seamlessly with my field of interest, but is also relevant to discuss in an age where new media technologies are reshaping every aspect of culture, including practices of writing and reading. The program looked promising on paper, inviting speakers with various backgrounds and from diverse disciplines. In reality, however, practically the whole series of lectures – apart from a few rare exceptions — was a tiring battle between the printed and the e-book. *"This will kill that."* Taking part in the discussion meant as much as picking sides. When the last speaker left the stage I found myself engulfed by a feeling of frustration. Frustration over the fact that a potentially rich discussion had been reduced to a collection of pleas in favor of one or another medium. Apart from the strong tendency to speak in terms of opposites, it struck me that almost none of the invitees addressed anything beyond the scope of medium or carrier, while I was hoping for some insights on how electronic technologies affect reading and writing on a deeper, more substantial level. I intend to gain some of them through my own graduation project.

Trajectory

My attempt to shed light on the gradual intensification of word technologization and some of the seemingly basic tools that enhanced this process will comprise of practical experiment(s) driven by theoretical research, the latter possibly being the basis for my thesis. This starts by immersing myself in a more in-depth study of the emergence of literacy out of primal aural/oral culture, thereby drawing heavily on the extensive work that Walter J. Ong and Marshall McLuhan have done within this terrain. I will focus closely on the invention of print and its importance for the evolution of literate cultures and the development of a textual organization of consciousness. The next step will be to move into the realm of electronic media, which is a significant step in the evolution of literacy because it created a framework for what Ong refers to as 'second orality'. It initiated possibilities of mediated communication and registration based on principles of primary oral cultures together with functional and conceptual characteristics of print culture, such as telephone, radio, television, and so forth. The role, appropriation and importance of 'editing' has also changed drastically through these developments, an aspect that will be part of the core of my research.

Practical starting points

In order to start crystallizing the above more practically, I would like to begin by building a text editor that explores, evaluates and amalgamates some principles of oral and literate culture. The idea – which should be regarded as a primer and is up for massive revision as I will be going along – is to have these constraints built into it:

- written words will only be very temporarily visible (fade away?)
- no/alternative copy-paste function (slight alteration when pasted?)
- no/alternative delete function (adding in more instead of getting rid of text?)
- everything is written to an external file that is only accessible when one decides the document is finished
- no possibility of editing a file after finishing it
- more magic I still need to ponder over

I am not only interested in the possible outcomes of this tool, but also in the potential of changing writing (and ultimately also reading) experiences by reconfiguring the parameters of a technology we are familiar with, generally take for granted and have fixed expectations from. By doing so, I try to emphasize on the artificiality of writing and its conception as a highly technologized instance of the spoken word. Again, both are not opposites but in a state of constant mutual reference and dependence. This approach of altering existing conventions and defining certain constraints can be applied to other writing and reading tools or contexts, and my plan is to do so too. But for now the idea of a text editor sounds, or should I write 'looks' in this format of a text, like a good place to start my quest.

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